

AN INFORMED RESPONSE
TO THE PAPAL ENCYCLICAL
MAGNIFICA HUMANITAS

On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

A Response from a PCA Ruling Elder*

*Governed by the Westminster Confession of Faith
and Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms*

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(*Please note, I do not speak for the PCA, my presbytery or my church. The opinions expressed here are my own.)

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FRONT MATTER

NOTICES

Transparent Use of AI (Notice)

Some content was assisted by Artificial Intelligence (AI) for research organization and editorial review.

We aim to use AI responsibly, guided by the TRAIN model as documented herein.

Contact

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About the Author

Thomas B. Kelley is the founder and writer behind SempRef and associated documents. His interest in artificial intelligence and computing began in the early 1980s at Covenant College, where he graduated in the first class to include a Computer Science major option ('85). He earned a double major in Psychology and Computer Science and spent 40+ years in the IT industry.

In March 2025, Thomas survived a massive heart attack. Recovery forced an unplanned slowdown, which became a providential opportunity to read widely across what churches and denominations were saying about AI. This project grew out of that season and reflects a snapshot of AI and the Church as it stood in late 2025 / early 2026. Technology moves faster than any committee; if referenced materials have since changed, please read with grace.

This work has also generated side papers and related projects, and it has sparked ongoing exploration of an AI assistant trained on Reformed theology with the explicit wisdom not to “play pastor.”

For additional information, visit <https://sempref.com/>

In Him,

Thomas B. Kelley

Preface: Why a Ruling Elder Should Respond

When the Bishop of Rome speaks to the world about artificial intelligence, the Presbyterian Church in America need not fall silent. The encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*, issued by Pope Leo XIV on May 15, 2026, is a serious and substantial document. It deserves a serious and substantial response — one grounded not in sectarian reflexes, but in the full weight of the Reformed confessional tradition.

I write as a Ruling Elder in the PCA, governed by the Westminster Standards that my church has received as a faithful summary of biblical doctrine. I do not write as a polemicist eager to score points against Rome, nor as an irenic seeking unity at the cost of truth. I write as a churchman who believes that every significant cultural and technological moment must be tested against the whole counsel of God.

The encyclical is not binding on my conscience — *the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture is the supreme judge of all controversies of religion* (WCF 1.10). But that does not mean Rome has nothing useful to say. It means I must read the document carefully, affirm what is true, qualify what is incomplete, and reject what is contrary to the Word of God. This response does precisely that.

The stakes are high. Artificial intelligence is reshaping the tools of commerce, governance, warfare, education, and — most critically for our purposes — the ministry of the Church. A generation of elders, pastors, and congregants will make decisions about these tools with or without theological guidance. My hope is that this response provides the kind of confessionally grounded framework the PCA needs as it navigates this extraordinary moment.

I. The Encyclical in Context

Magnifica Humanitas arrives after a sustained period of Roman Catholic engagement with questions of technology and ethics. It was preceded by the 2025 Vatican document *Antiqua et Nova*, which explored the theological contours of artificial intelligence through the framework of Catholic social teaching. The 2026 encyclical builds on that foundation, addressing themes of human dignity, economic justice, labor displacement, algorithmic deception, autonomous weapons, and the proper ordering of technology to human flourishing.

The encyclical is expansive in scope and notably serious in theological register. It is not a merely political document dressed in theological clothing. The Pope invokes the image of God, the corrupting effects of sin upon social structures, the dignity of workers, the protection of children, and the dangers of concentrated technological power. In places, it rises to genuine prophetic clarity about the ways artificial intelligence can be weaponized against the vulnerable.

A Reformed elder must acknowledge that this is a thoughtful document produced by a tradition with centuries of serious moral reasoning behind it. The purpose of this response is not to dismiss it wholesale, but to read it as a public moral-theological document — one whose claims are examinable against the standard of Scripture and the Westminster Standards.

"The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added." — WCF 1.6

That standard — not institutional prestige, not centuries of tradition, not global reach — is the ultimate criterion by which any ecclesiastical document must be judged.

II. Our Governing Framework: How a Reformed Elder Reads Rome

Before engaging the encyclical's substance, I must establish the theological tools I am bringing to the task. These are not arbitrary preferences; they are the load-bearing pillars of the confessional tradition I have vowed to uphold.

A. The Supremacy and Sufficiency of Scripture

The Westminster Confession opens with the declaration that the "*Holy Scripture is most necessary*" for the knowledge of God and His will necessary for salvation and godly living (WCF 1.1). This is not a narrow fundamentalism; it is a principled epistemology. The Scripture alone, as the Word of God, is the final authority in all matters of faith and life (WCF 1.10). When the encyclical proposes to develop binding social doctrine through papal pronouncement and conciliar tradition, it invokes a source of authority that the Westminster Standards do not recognize and that I, as a PCA elder, cannot receive.

This is not a peripheral disagreement. The WCF explicitly states that "*the Pope of Rome hath no jurisdiction*" over the universal church (WCF 25.6). I affirm this not with triumphalism, but with conviction: the issue is not personality or politics, but the nature of authority. A PCA elder reads Magnifica Humanitas the way a careful lawyer reads an amicus brief — with genuine interest, and with clear awareness that it carries no binding force over his conscience or his congregation.

B. The Noetic Effects of the Fall

The encyclical's ethical framework relies substantially on natural law reasoning — the idea that human reason, operating on common moral ground, can discern and enact principles of justice and human flourishing. The Reformed tradition affirms general revelation (WCF 1.1; Romans 1:19–20) and acknowledges what the Confession calls "*common grace*" — God's restraining of sin and His gifts to the unregenerate. But we insist on something the encyclical consistently underweights: the **noetic effects of the Fall**.

According to WCF 6.2–6, the fall into sin brought total corruption to every faculty of the human person — including the mind. The Confession speaks of "*the mind wholly defiled,*" and the Larger Catechism enumerates among the sins of the understanding: "*blindness*

of mind, a reprobate sense, strong delusions, hardness of heart, horror of conscience, and vile affections" (WLC 25). This means that the human reason which designs, deploys, and governs artificial intelligence is not a neutral instrument capable of autonomous ethical navigation. It is a faculty that, apart from the regenerating work of the Spirit and the illuminating guide of Scripture, will inevitably bend its greatest gifts toward its own darkest ends.

The encyclical's language about "human grandeur" and humanity's creative gifts is not wrong per se — it reflects the genuine glory of the image of God in which we were made. But that language, separated from an equally serious confession of the Fall and its ongoing effects, produces a framework that is structurally optimistic about the capacity of human reason to govern itself. A Reformed evaluation must supply that missing doctrine.

C. The Sovereignty of God and His Providence

The Heidelberg Catechism's magnificent answer to Q&A 27 teaches that divine providence means "all things come to us not by chance but from His fatherly hand." WCF 5.1 teaches that God, *"the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most holy and sovereign power."* This includes neural networks, large language models, semiconductor supply chains, and every byte of data that flows through the digital world.

Artificial intelligence is not a rogue force, an autonomous power, or a new deity. It is a creature of human sub-creativity, entirely subject to Christ's kingship. The encyclical correctly worries about what happens when AI becomes an idol or an instrument of domination. A Reformed framework supplies the deeper account: the reason AI poses a threat is not merely technological complexity, but the sin of those who build it, fund it, deploy it, and refuse to govern it under God's law (Genesis 1:28; Colossians 1:16–17).

D. The Means of Grace and the Office of Ministry

The Westminster Standards teach that God has ordained specific means by which He works in His people: the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments, and prayer (WCF 21; WSC 88). These means are not merely helpful; they are the ordinary channels through which the Holy Spirit works faith and builds up the Church. They are

incarnational: they require called, ordained, accountable human messengers. They cannot be automated.

This is not a Luddite position. It is a position grounded in the doctrine of the Church (WCF 25–31). The "*power of the Church is ministerial and declarative*" (WCF 30.1) — not technological or algorithmic. When AI is used to simulate pastoral counsel, generate sermons, or automate liturgy, it does not merely assist the ministry; it usurps an office that belongs to the man who has been called, examined, and ordained to fill it (1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9).

III. Areas of Genuine Agreement

A Reformed response to Rome must be honest. Where the encyclical speaks truly, we must say so. Common grace means that even those who operate from a different theological system can reach true moral conclusions. The following areas of Magnifica Humanitas deserve affirmation:

A. Human Dignity Grounded in Creation

The encyclical opens by affirming that human beings are created by God and face a pivotal moral choice in the age of AI. This is precisely right. WCF 4.2 teaches that *"God created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own image."* The Westminster Larger Catechism (Q&A 17) elaborates that God made man in His own image — a dignity that no technology can confer or remove. We affirm with the encyclical that human dignity must not be reduced to utility, productivity, data, or market value.

B. AI as Servant, Not Sovereign

Magnifica Humanitas insists that artificial intelligence must serve human flourishing rather than replace human judgment. This aligns with what the Westminster Standards imply through the doctrine of dominion. Genesis 1:28, reflected in WCF 4.2 and WLC 17, establishes that humanity is to exercise stewardship over the created order. Machines are tools under human authority, not rivals for the throne. The encyclical's consistent warning against the idolization of technological power and the concentration of AI capability in the hands of the few finds genuine resonance in the Reformed commitment to stewardship under God.

C. Truth, Transparency, and the Ninth Commandment

The document's concern about manipulation, misinformation, opacity, and deceptive AI applications is materially consistent with the Westminster Larger Catechism's exposition of the ninth commandment. WLC Q&A 143 defines the duties required by the ninth commandment as: *"the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, and the good name of our neighbor, as well as our own; appearing and standing for the truth; and from the heart, sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully, speaking the truth."* WLC

144–145 condemns *"all prejudicing the truth, and the good name of our neighbors or ourselves...raising false rumors, receiving and countenancing evil reports."* An AI ecosystem designed to generate convincing falsehoods at scale is a ninth-commandment emergency, and the encyclical is right to name it as such.

D. Care for the Vulnerable and the Eighth Commandment

The encyclical's focus on workers displaced by automation, children exposed to algorithmic manipulation, and the poor subjected to algorithmic discrimination reflects duties that WLC Q&A 140–142 assigns under the eighth commandment: "to render to everyone his due; to give and lend freely, according to our abilities and his necessities; to...endeavor, by all just and lawful means, to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others, as well as our own." A technology regime that concentrates wealth and power while immiserating the vulnerable is a violation of God's moral law, not merely a policy failure.

E. Civil Oversight and the Proper Role of Government

The encyclical's call for public accountability, legal oversight, and regulatory governance of AI harms can be affirmed in principle. WCF 23.1–2 recognizes that the civil magistrate is ordained by God to *"suppress evil-doers"* and maintain *"justice and peace."* Civil authorities have not only the right but the duty to regulate the public harms that AI systems can inflict. A Reformed elder should be among the most articulate advocates for just and accountable governance of these technologies — not because Rome says so, but because God's Word requires it.

IV. Areas Requiring Reformed Qualification

The encyclical's agreements with Scripture are real but incomplete. Where it affirms true things, it often does so without the doctrinal architecture that gives those truths their full weight and stability. The following qualifications are not nitpicking; they are corrections of significant structural deficiencies.

A. Human Grandeur Must Be Read Through Creation and Fall Together

The encyclical's positive language about human creativity, dignity, and co-creative capacity is not wrong — but it is dangerously one-sided. The Westminster Standards teach that *"our first parents...fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin"* (WCF 6.2). Total depravity means that every faculty — including the remarkable capacities that make AI development possible — is bent by sin. WCF 9.3 teaches that *"Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good."* A theology of technology that celebrates human "grandeur" without equally confessing human fallenness will inevitably produce a framework of moral optimism that the facts of history — and the facts of AI development — simply do not support.

B. Natural Law Reasoning Must Remain Subordinate to Scripture

The encyclical's ethical methodology relies substantially on natural law reasoning developed through Catholic tradition. The Reformed tradition affirms general revelation (WCF 1.1; Romans 1:18–20) and acknowledges that moral principles can be discerned through creation and conscience. But WCF 1.6 is clear: Scripture alone contains the whole counsel of God necessary for faith and life. Natural law reasoning, however sophisticated, cannot become an independent or equal source of binding moral doctrine for the Church. Where the encyclical builds its ethical framework on natural law without subjecting it to the authority of Scripture, a Reformed elder must mark the deficiency.

C. AI Ethics Is Moral, Not Redemptive

The encyclical at points frames the project of humane AI governance in quasi-redemptive language, as if the right regulation of technology can participate in the restoration of

human dignity and the healing of the world. A Reformed evaluation must insist on the distinction between civil righteousness and redemptive grace. Better AI policy, more just algorithms, and humane design are legitimate civil goods — but they do not reconcile sinners to God, renew the heart, or establish the kingdom of Christ. WSC Q&A 85–88 identifies the ordinary means through which God communicates the benefits of redemption: the Word, the Sacraments, and prayer. No technological regulation belongs on that list.

D. Human Community Must Not Displace Union with Christ

The encyclical frequently invokes “solidarity,” “communion,” and “social bonds” as the primary goods that AI threatens and that ethics must protect. These are genuine goods. But the Westminster Standards place the supreme good of human persons not in social solidarity but in union with Christ (WCF 8; WCF 26; WSC Q&A 1: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever”). A theological response to AI that centers human community without centering human beings’ relationship to God produces a vision of flourishing that, however attractive, falls short of what Scripture teaches. The deepest problem with AI is not that it threatens human connection; it is that it threatens human creatures made for the glory of God.

V. Areas of Principled Disagreement

A. The Epistemological Foundation: Natural Law Versus Sola Scriptura

The most fundamental divergence between the encyclical’s framework and the Westminster Standards is epistemological. The Roman Catholic approach assumes that ethical truth — including the ethics of artificial intelligence — can be reliably derived from natural law reasoning, developed through magisterial tradition, and applied through institutional authority. A Reformed elder must reject this framework, not out of hostility to reason, but out of fidelity to Scripture.

Feature	Roman Catholic Approach	Reformed (PCA) Position
Primary Authority	Magisterial teaching & Tradition	Sola Scriptura (WCF Ch. I)
Ethical Basis	Natural Law & "Common Good"	Biblical Law & Covenantal Fidelity
Human Reason	Capable of autonomous moral navigation	Fallen; subject to Total Depravity (WCF Ch. VI)
Doctrinal Development	Ongoing through papal pronouncement	Complete in Scripture (WCF 1.6)
Church’s Authority	Legislative and magisterial	Ministerial and declarative (WCF 30.1)

The difference is not merely academic. Proverbs 3:5–6 commands: *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths."* This is not a counsel of intellectual passivity; it is a fundamental orientation that requires all human reasoning — including the reasoning behind AI ethics — to be brought under the authority of God’s revealed will.

B. The Problem of Magisterial Authority and Global Governance

The encyclical, by its very nature, positions the Roman See as the global ethical arbiter for artificial intelligence. Through the Rome Call for AI Ethics and Rome’s collaborative frameworks with secular technology companies, the Vatican is seeking to broker a form

of "*algor-ethics*" with universal reach. From a Reformed perspective, this is both ecclesiologicaly problematic and strategically dangerous.

WCF 31.2 is explicit: "Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth." WCF 25.6 rejects any notion that a single bishop holds universal jurisdiction over the Church of Christ. The power of the church is not institutional leverage on global technology policy; it is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18–20).

When the institutional Church trades the purity of its prophetic witness for a seat at the table of global governance, it risks something worse than political irrelevance: it risks becoming what the Reformers warned against — a "*worldly kingdom*" that confuses the ministry of Word and Sacrament with the management of civilizational infrastructure. The PCA's ecclesiastical power is, and must remain, "*ministerial and declarative*" (WCF 30.1) — not magisterial and legislative.

C. Anthropological Fault Lines: Imago Dei, the Fall, and the Machine

The encyclical's framing of AI as a form of "intelligence" sharing a conceptual continuum with human reason is a theological category error with serious consequences. Magnifica Humanitas speaks of AI and human intelligence in ways that, however carefully qualified, risk blurring the absolute ontological distinction between Creator, Image-Bearer, and Tool.

The Westminster Standards require that we maintain an unbridgeable distinction. WCF 4.2 teaches that God created man with a "reasonable and immortal soul" — a possession unique to human beings, not possessed by any machine, however sophisticated. WLC Q&A 17 grounds human dignity specifically in the image of God. AI systems — however capable they appear — are statistical pattern-matching engines. They lack consciousness, moral agency, covenant standing, and the immortal soul that makes human persons accountable before God (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Hebrews 9:27).

The practical danger of anthropomorphizing machines is not merely philosophical. When AI systems are treated as morally serious agents — as things that can "know,"

"understand," "recommend," or "care" — human beings are relieved of the moral responsibility that belongs exclusively to them. WCF 3.1 and 5.4 preserve creaturely responsibility within God's sovereign providence. The doctrine of sin (WCF 6) insists that *"every sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto, doth, in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner"* — upon the **sinner**, not upon the algorithm.

D. The Means of Grace and the Care of Souls

The encyclical cautiously warns against the wholesale automation of pastoral and spiritual functions, but it does not draw the sharp line that Reformed ecclesiology requires. The Westminster Standards are unambiguous: God has appointed specific, irreplaceable means through which He works in His people. WSC Q&A 88 describes these as *"the word, sacraments, and prayer"* administered through called and ordained officers (WCF 27–29; 1 Timothy 3:1–7; Acts 20:28).

This generates specific, non-negotiable prohibitions for the Church:

- **Homiletic Substitution:** The use of AI to compose sermons violates the minister's calling. Preaching is a means of grace in which Christ speaks through a specific, called, Spirit-filled messenger (Romans 10:14–17; WCF 21.5). A machine cannot be ordained; it cannot be a "herald of the King."
- **Pastoral Simulation:** The *cura animarum* — the care of souls — is an incarnational duty. The elder who weeps with those who weep (Romans 12:15), who prays over the sick (James 5:14), and who bears one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) cannot be replaced by an algorithm. Algorithmic "counseling" is a fraudulent imitation of the covenantal bond between shepherd and sheep.
- **Liturgical Automation:** The Regulative Principle of Worship (WCF 21.1) requires that public worship contain only what God has commanded in His Word. AI-generated prayers, liturgical forms, or devotional content have no warrant in Scripture and no place in the assembly of the saints.
- **Ecclesial Plagiarism:** Relying on predictive text engines for theological instruction undermines the sanctity of truth and the integrity of the teacher's office. The elder who teaches is accountable for what he teaches (James 3:1); outsourcing that labor to an algorithm does not transfer the accountability.

E. Tradition as Doctrinal Authority

The encyclical draws extensively on a history of papal encyclicals, Vatican II documents, and the accumulated tradition of Catholic social teaching. It presents this tradition as a developing, authoritative guide for the Church's engagement with the world. WCF 31.3 is clear: *"All synods or councils, since the apostles' times...may err, and many have erred."* WCF 1.10 establishes that *"the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined...can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."* Tradition is a valuable servant; it is a tyrannical master. The accumulation of papal pronouncements, however sincere, does not constitute doctrinal authority for the Reformed Church.

VI. A Reformed Framework for the Church and Artificial Intelligence

Having assessed the encyclical, a Reformed elder must offer something constructive. The PCA does not yet have a formal position on AI. That gap is a problem, but it is also an opportunity to produce guidance that is genuinely confessional rather than reactionary. The following principles are grounded in the Westminster Standards and applicable to sessions, presbyteries, and the General Assembly.

A. Principle One: Sovereignty Governs Every Algorithm

No AI system operates outside the providential governance of God. WCF 5.1 teaches that God *"doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things."* This means that the Church's engagement with AI need not be driven by fear. We do not face a power beyond God's control. We face a powerful human tool that, like all powerful human tools, will be used for both good and ill according to the character of those who wield it (Proverbs 10:2; 11:4). Our response should be sober, not panicked — wise, not paralyzed.

B. Principle Two: The Image of God Is Non-Negotiable

Every application of AI must be evaluated by its effect on human beings as image-bearers of God. WCF 4.2; WLC 17. This provides a clear ethical filter: any AI use that reduces persons to data points, replaces human relationship with algorithmic simulation, concentrates power unjustly, or deceives vulnerable people stands condemned by the same moral law that has always governed these matters. The sixth, eighth, and ninth commandments — as expounded in WLC 134–145 — are fully applicable to the digital domain.

C. Principle Three: The Means of Grace Are Irreplaceable

Sessions must be explicit: AI has no standing in the ministry of Word, Sacrament, or Prayer. It may assist in administrative tasks, research, and communication, as any useful tool does. But it may not preach, counsel, administer sacraments, compose prayers for public worship, or exercise any function that belongs to the ordained office. The boundary

is not a matter of taste or preference; it is a matter of ecclesiological principle rooted in the Westminster Standards (WCF 25–31; WSC 88).

D. Principle Four: Transparency and Accountability Are Ninth-Commandment Duties

Where AI tools are used in church life and ministry, full transparency is required. WLC Q&A 144–145 identifies *"keeping lawful promises; studying and practicing whatsoever things are true, honest, lovely, and of good report"* as ninth-commandment duties. Congregants have a right to know when AI-generated content is used in their church. Leaders who use AI tools without disclosure violate the trust of those they serve.

E. Principle Five: Covenantal Fidelity Over Technological Efficiency

The temptation in every generation is to confuse efficiency with faithfulness. The slow work of a pastor who sits with a grieving widow, of an elder who spends hours in prayer before a difficult session meeting, of a congregation that gathers week after week to hear the Word preached — this is the work of the Church. No efficiency gain justifies bypassing it. The "idol of efficiency" (Exodus 20:3–5) is as dangerous in silicon as in gold.

VII. Westminster Verdicts: A Summary Assessment

The following table summarizes the Reformed evaluation of the encyclical’s major themes, using the Westminster Standards as the governing framework:

Topic	Verdict	Westminster Reasoning
Human dignity grounded in imago Dei	Affirmed	WCF 4.2; WLC 17 — Dignity is grounded in creation by God and the image He imparted.
AI as servant, not sovereign	Affirmed	WCF 4.2; WLC 17 — Consistent with dominion and stewardship under God.
Warnings about manipulation, deception, false witness	Affirmed	WLC 143–145 — The ninth commandment condemns all forms of deceptive AI application.
Protection of the vulnerable	Affirmed	WLC 135–142 — The sixth and eighth commandments require protection of the weak.
Civil oversight of AI harms	Affirmed	WCF 23.1–2 — The magistrate may regulate public harm and maintain justice.
Papal encyclical as binding authority	Rejected	WCF 1.10; 25.6 — Scripture is the supreme judge; the Pope holds no universal jurisdiction.
Catholic Social Doctrine as church teaching	Rejected	WCF 1.6; 31.3 — Tradition may contain true observations; it cannot bind Reformed conscience.
Human nature without adequate account of the Fall	Qualified/Deficient	WCF 6; 9.3 — Dignity must be joined to the confession of sin, guilt, and need for grace.
AI ethics framed as quasi-redemptive	Rejected	WCF 11; WSC 85–88 — Civil righteousness is not justification or regeneration.
AI in preaching, pastoral care, or liturgy	Rejected	WCF 21.1; 25–31; WSC 88 — The means of grace require called and ordained human ministers.
AI personhood or quasi-moral agency	Rejected	WCF 4.2; WLC 17 — AI possesses neither immortal soul nor covenant standing.
Civilizational hope in ethical AI governance	Qualified	WCF 32–33; WSC 37–38 — The final hope of humanity is Christ’s return, not a just social order.

VIII. Pastoral Guidance for Sessions and Church Leaders

This document is not written to end a conversation but to begin one — or rather, to give that conversation the theological grounding it requires. The following practical guidance is offered to sessions, presbyteries, and any elder who must navigate these questions in the local church.

A. Use the Encyclical as a Conversation Partner, Not an Authority

Magnifica Humanitas is a thoughtful document from a tradition that has spent centuries reasoning carefully about technology and society. A PCA elder can read it with profit, noting where Rome's moral instincts align with Scripture's commands and where the underlying theology requires correction. This is the posture of a Berean (Acts 17:11) — not a dismissive sectarian, and not an uncritical ecumenist.

B. Keep Anthropology Central in Every AI Discussion

Every conversation about AI in the church must begin with the question: who is the human person? Not merely what can AI do, or how efficiently it does it, but: what does this do to, and for, creatures made in the image of God, fallen in Adam, redeemed in Christ? The Westminster Standards provide the most theologically complete account of human nature in Protestant Christianity. Use it.

C. Draw Clear Ecclesiological Lines

Sessions should establish explicit policies about the use of AI in ministry contexts. These need not be technically sophisticated. They need to be theologically clear: AI may assist; AI may not minister. AI may organize data; AI may not preach the Word. AI may suggest resources; AI may not provide pastoral counsel. The line is not drawn at competence; it is drawn at calling and office.

D. Guard Against the Idol of Efficiency

The Reformed tradition has always recognized the particular danger of things that are not wrong in themselves becoming idols. The Westminster Shorter Catechism Q&A 4 teaches that *"God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth."* Our worship and service is owed to Him, not to

any system or process. When efficiency becomes the primary value driving decisions about ministry, the Church has made an idol of a tool. The “slow work” of discipleship, study, prayer, and pastoral visitation is not inefficiency; it is the shape of faithful ministry.

E. Advocate for Just Civil Governance of AI

Ruling elders have a calling that extends beyond the walls of the church building. As citizens of civil society, they are called to pursue justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God in every sphere (Micah 6:8). This includes advocating for just governance of AI technologies in the public square — not in the name of a Catholic social doctrine, but in the name of God’s moral law written on human hearts (Romans 2:14–15) and more fully revealed in Scripture.

IX. Discussion Questions for Sessions and Elders

The following questions are offered for session meetings, presbytery discussions, and any elder who wants to lead his congregation in thinking through these matters:

- Where does the encyclical speak truly according to the creation and the moral law, and where does it reflect Roman authority structures that Westminster cannot receive?
- Does our theology of artificial intelligence adequately account for original sin and total depravity, or does it lean toward moral optimism about technology's potential?
- What AI uses in church life are merely circumstantial aids (scheduling software, administrative tools), and what uses would intrude into Word, Sacrament, discipline, or pastoral authority?
- How does the ninth commandment (WLC 143–145) apply specifically to AI-generated misinformation, surveillance, and automated reputational harm in our community?
- How does WCF 23 guide our engagement with civil AI policy, while WCF 30–31 preserves the church's distinct spiritual government?
- If a pastor or elder uses AI to assist in sermon preparation, what level of transparency do congregants deserve, and what does the ninth commandment require?
- How does the doctrine of Providence (WCF 5; Heidelberg Q&A 27–28) shape our response to the fear and disruption that AI creates in many people's lives?
- What would a PCA study committee on artificial intelligence need to produce in order to be genuinely useful to teaching and ruling elders who face these questions now?

X. Conclusion: Christ Remains King Over the Algorithms

The encyclical Magnifica Humanitas is not, at its best, a document about technology. It is a document about power — who holds it, how it is used, and whether it serves or destroys the human beings over whom it is exercised. In that sense, it is asking one of the oldest questions in human history: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Who will guard the guardians?

The Reformed answer is not a committee, a regulator, or a papal encyclical. The Reformed answer is the sovereign God who governs every molecule and every megabyte in His creation (Psalm 115:3; Daniel 4:34–35). The PCA's calling in this moment is not to compete with Rome for the role of global ethical arbiter, nor to cede the field to those who would govern technology without reference to God. Our calling is the same it has always been: to proclaim the whole counsel of God, to equip the saints for works of service, and to hold every human innovation — including the most powerful algorithms ever built — accountable to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Christ is not merely a spiritual sovereign over private souls. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16), to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given (Matthew 28:18). His kingdom comes not through technological governance or institutional prestige, but through the Spirit working in the Word and Sacraments He has ordained. The PCA's power is, and must remain, "*ministerial and declarative*" (WCF 30.1). We do not govern the machines; we proclaim the Gospel to those who build them, those who suffer under them, and those who will one day give account to the One who made them.

"The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His kingdom rules over all." — Psalm 103:19

"For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen." — Romans 11:36

May the PCA navigate this digital age with the wisdom that comes from above — pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere (James 3:17) — relying not on the predictive power of silicon, but on the sovereign power of the Spirit working through the Word.

Appendix: Key Westminster Standards References

The following Westminster Standards references are cited throughout this document as the governing theological framework:

Standard	Doctrinal Content
WCF 1.1, 1.6, 1.10	Scripture: necessity, sufficiency, and supreme authority in all controversies of religion
WCF 4.2	Creation of humanity in the image of God with a rational and immortal soul
WCF 5.1–4	Providence: God’s sovereign governance of all things, including creaturely responsibility
WCF 6.2–6	The Fall: total corruption of every human faculty, including the mind (noetic effects)
WCF 9.3	Free will after the Fall: man wholly lost all ability to any spiritual good
WCF 21.1	The Regulative Principle of Worship: only what God commands in His Word
WCF 23.1–2	Civil magistracy: lawfully ordained by God to maintain justice and suppress evil
WCF 25.2–6	The visible church; rejection of papal headship and universal jurisdiction
WCF 30.1; 31.2–3	Church government: power is ministerial and declarative, not legislative or coercive
WLC 17	God made humanity in His own image in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness
WLC 135–145	Sixth, eighth, and ninth commandments: protecting life, property, and truth
WSC Q&A 1	Man’s chief end: to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever
WSC Q&A 88	Ordinary means of grace: Word, Sacraments, and Prayer

Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 27: "What do you understand by the providence of God? The almighty and ever present power of God by which God upholds, as with His hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought,

fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty — all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but by His fatherly hand."

Soli Deo Gloria

All glory to God alone